

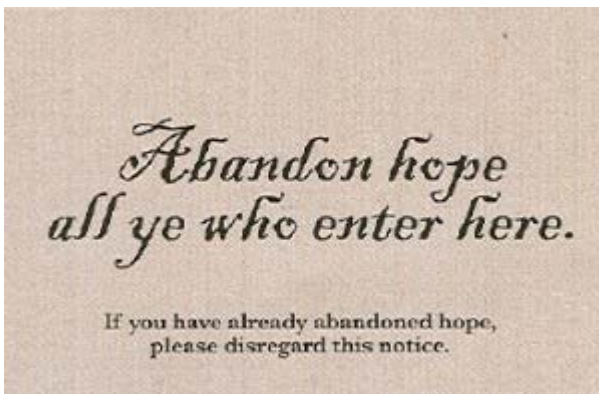


ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 35, 20 OCTOBER 2010

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *A need for new frameworks*
- 2 *Providing all students with access to appropriate technologies*
- 3 *A celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa, 29 October 2010*
- 4 *Report back after the STLSC meeting of 18 October*
- 5 *Why this obsession with technology?*
- 6 *Thirty-five communiqués later...*
- 7 *ODL Repository and blog*

1 **A NEED FOR NEW FRAMEWORKS**



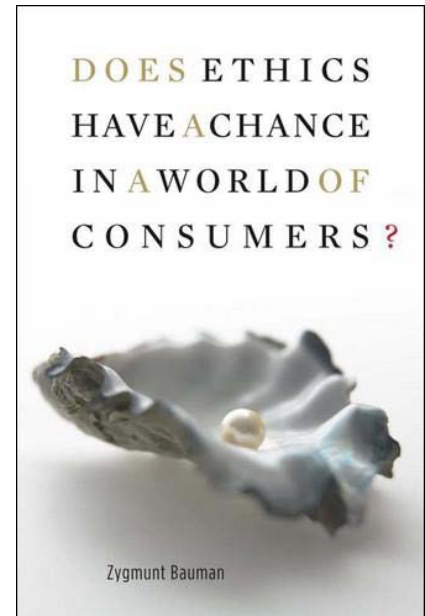
Frameworks are ways of making sense of the world in which we live in and these frameworks come in different forms. If your framework is that “only the strongest survive”, you will most probably see the world differently than a person who sees the world of being “generous and abundant”. Institutional frameworks (like personal ones) are shared vocabularies which shape, collectively, the way we see the world. But

our frameworks not only shape us, but also shape our responses to our context. Often these frameworks and ways of thinking become comfort zones. But frequently our frameworks are *more* than comfort zones. They can also become and resemble graveyards or deserts killing all hope and innovation. The words “All hope abandon ye who enter here” (Dante, 14th century) often apply to institutional attempts to change existing frameworks of thinking regarding teaching and learning at Unisa.

In the foreword to his book, “Does ethics have a chance in a world of consumers”, Zygmunt Bauman (2008) explores how current frameworks and “conceptual nets” prevent us from looking afresh at challenges humanity is facing, such as rampant consumerism. Instead of suggesting solutions to the quandaries broader society is facing, Bauman (2008:2) reflects on where the roots of the predicaments lie, what type of thinking underlies the dilemmas we are facing and “what questions need to be asked if we are to uncover them”. For years the dominant framework of thinking about the earth was that the earth is flat and that man (sic) is the centre of the universe. While the notion of the earth as flat has been discarded, it did not come easily.

In this foreword, Bauman (2008) tries to uncover the thinking patterns that underlie some of the current frameworks of sense-making in the world. Bauman (2008:10) refers to recent research done in Panama on the behaviour of wasps. Scientists believed that wasps belonging to specific nests will kill 'stranger' wasps when these wasps visit (by accident) nests that are not their own.

Research however found that this belief is baseless and that wasps frequently change nests and become part of the functioning of their new environments without being killed. "... none of the nests they [the researchers] explored had the means to keep its borders watertight, and each had to accept the perpetual exchange of its population" (2008:10). Bauman (2008) then relates that when these findings were shared, people responded by questioning the findings stating that the fact that wasps are not killed in their new nests, should be ascribed to the fact that the 'new' wasps are not really strangers, but are recognised as being of the same genetic offspring (nephews and nieces) and therefore they actually have come home... The newly produced evidence just did not "fit" into the frameworks of those who belief that 'belonging' can be explained on grounds of genetic makeup. There just had to be a reason why new wasps actually fitted in... And the reason had to 'fit' into what the disbelievers accepted as true regarding communities, of 'us' and 'them'. Bauman (2008:11-12) then states – "As we try desperately to grasp the dynamics of planetary affairs today, our old and hard-dying habit of organising the balance of power with the help of such conceptual tools such as centre and periphery, hierarchy, and superiority and inferiority serves more as a handicap than, as before, an asset; more as blinders than as searchlights".



Bauman (2008:29-30) concludes his foreword by referring to the work of Václav Havel who stated that "hope is not a prognostication" (I had to look up this word... it refers to "a prediction of a future event or outcome; a forecast, a prophecy"). "Indeed, hope pays little if any respect to statistics, to pedantically calculated trends and fickle majority opinions. Hope, as a rule, looks and stretches itself beyond today and tomorrow..." (Bauman 2008:30). Havel, according to Bauman (2008:30) only had three "primitive, low-tech" weapons namely "hope, courage, and stubbornness". Bauman (2008:30) ends by stating that although these three "weapons" had been there since Palaeolithic times, "we use them much too seldom".

I started this reflection by stating that there is an urgent need at Unisa to rethink some of our frameworks regarding teaching and learning at Unisa. Some of our current frameworks "serves more as a handicap than, as before, an asset; more as blinders than as searchlights", in the words of Bauman (2008:11-12).

Some of the frameworks that we, (in my humble opinion), need to rethink are

- The never-say-die notion of the digital divide or our beliefs regarding our students' access to technology and more importantly, the role technology will play at Unisa in 5 years' time. I feel that the institution is held hostage by constant claims regarding the peculiarities of the Unisa student profile and the digital divide. It is claimed that our students are very different from the students at other South African universities. It is claimed that our students don't have access, don't know how to use computers, cannot use mobile technologies outside of sending "please call me's", etc. And, like the evidence regarding the wasps, new evidence that more students than we assume have regular access to the Internet, is discarded. The new evidence just does not fit into the dominant framework or beliefs that our students don't have access and that our students are permanently disenfranchised. Evidence proves that more than 41% of students submitted their assignments online. More than 80% of our students submitted their MCQ assignments online in 2010. In a pilot project, more than 700 students in the College of Law submitted their MCQ assignment using their *mobiles*.

What are the beliefs, evidence and assumptions that form the foundation of current framework of beliefs regarding our students' connectivity? What are the beliefs and assumptions that we will need to optimise the affordances of technology?

- What are the beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation for our learner support model? Since its birth, learner support at Unisa was seen as an add-on and the 'problem' of the tutors and TSDL. We have a special portfolio and special college and departmental committees dealing with learner support. We often chose junior staff to serve on these committees. Many Academic Department Tutor Coordinators (ADTCs) are junior academic staff with little or no institutional background or clout. Many academics think about learner support only *after* they have developed study materials. What are the beliefs and assumptions on which this framework is based? Are those beliefs still valid? If learner support is integral to the design of teaching and learning, why do we have separate committees for learner support? How does the separateness of learner support committees and initiatives align with the much-hyped notion of student-centeredness?
- What are the beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation for the practice that lecturers go to (some of) the regions to facilitate group discussions for those who could afford the time-off and the cost of travelling? Don't we have tutors in the regions that can fulfil these roles? Or don't we trust them? Are they of a lesser tribe than the tribe on the Muckleneuk and Florida campuses? Why reach out to less than 20% of our students while using Video Conferencing and Satellite Broadcasting can actually reach all of our students now that these sessions will be recorded?

- What are the beliefs and assumptions that form the basis for our current regional model? Unisa's current regional model was developed based on certain assumptions and beliefs regarding the role of regions; assumptions and beliefs regarding the centre and the regional. Our regional centres were (and often still are) the saving grace of many students who register in the regions, increasingly use the computer laboratories, loan books from the regional libraries, attend face-to-face tutorials and so forth. What were the assumptions and beliefs that resulted in this model? Are these beliefs and assumptions still valid? What new beliefs and assumptions are emerging? Do we need more regional centres? Do we need different *type* of regional centres? Is our regional staff ready for different roles? Are the Muckleneuk and Florida campuses willing to see the regions as equals but with different responsibilities? Are our regional centres willing to serve the bigger organisational picture or have they become autonomous mini Unisa's? What are the beliefs and assumptions forming the basis for these different opinions, claims and counter-claims? Do we know? Do we care to know?
- What are the beliefs and assumptions that form the basis for our current continuous professional development model at Unisa? Do we have training and re-skilling programs to teach our academics to drool when we ring the bell? Do we develop *all* staff at Unisa to flourish in particular fields? Is there scope for negotiating personal learning trajectories in service of fulfilment? Or is staff training at Unisa part of a mandatory assimilation into the needs of the Organisation with a capital 'O'?

Maybe we should get a discussion started on three types of futures namely possible futures, probable futures and desirable futures. If we can get consensus on a number of *desirable* futures for Unisa, maybe we can start to plan for them to realise? "Hope, as a rule, looks and stretches itself beyond today and tomorrow..." Bauman suggested (2008:30). We have three primitive and low-tech tools and weapons to dream a different Unisa into being, namely hope, courage, and stubbornness. I stubbornly believe that the ODL project can create a space for Unisa to courageously question claims and counter-claims, in the service of hope.

2 PROVIDING ALL STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES

The Executive Director: Academic Planner, Prof Peter Havenga, has been tasked by the STLSC of 20 September to explore the possibilities of providing all postgraduate students with a laptop. A meeting of representatives from all stakeholders at Unisa took place on 14 October 2010. From the discussions, a number of key pointers arose which will take this initiative further:

1. We should explore ways to increase all students' connectivity and not only postgraduate students.

2. *Good technologies will not make bad teaching better.* Technologies serve teaching and learning and not the other way round.
3. The purpose of the proposal is not to provide access to technologies but to facilitate and increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning.
4. Unisa should use its student numbers as leverage to negotiate favourable options for our students from a number of reputable providers.
5. While the original proposal specifically mentioned laptops, the proposal should cover a range devices and products and not only laptops.
6. It is crucial for academic departments to provide input regarding the nature of devices that will assist students in their learning. Once the Tender Committee has approved that Unisa should go out on an expression of interest, colleges will be requested to provide input.
7. The provision of devices should provide students with value for money over a period of time and not be vulnerable to frequent changes.
8. Unisa should explore using devices which are low in cost, but with possible high impact.
9. Communication to students should also be clear regarding which devices will *not* be appropriate in the long term for the specific requirements of their studies at Unisa.
10. There should be enough support and computer literacy training available to students who do need the training and support.
11. Unisa will choose a number of providers which will be updated annually based on a number of requirements such as national footprint, the value proposition, available online and walk-in support, etc.

It was decided that the proposal will now be referred to the Tender Committee for permission to go out on an expression of interest.

3 A CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA, 29 OCTOBER 2010

All Unisa staff is invited to a celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa on 29 October 2010 in the Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, on the Pretoria campus from 08:30 - 13:30.



At this event we will celebrate innovative practices in teaching and learning ranging from the use of tutors, E-tutors, Mxit and other social media, portfolios, satellite broadcasts and video conferencing, etc. As we would like to provide lunch for everyone attending the event, it is essential that you book a place by sending an e-mail to the Project Administrator of the ODL Project, Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena, mokoets@unisa.ac.za.

The tentative programme looks as follows:

08:00	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>	
08:30	Official Welcome	Prof MC Maré, Vice Principal: Academic & Research
08:45	Overview of the programme	Dr Paul Prinsloo, ODL Coordinator
08:55	The role of E-Tutors in teaching End-user Computing	Ms Klarissa Engelbrecht, Computing
09:15	Tutoring: The Science Foundation Programme	Mr Felix Fushai, SFP Coordinator Ms Michelle van Wyk, Geography
09:35	Using Mxit in supporting students	Ms Annelien van Rooyen, Financial Accounting
09:55	Virtual tutors in teaching Micro-economics	Mr Bernard Serfontein (Economics) Mr Willie le Roux (Economics)
10:15	Open discussion	
10:30	<i>Tea/coffee</i>	
11:00	Using portfolios in assessment	Mr Rudi Pretorius (Geography)
11:20	Using podcasts in the teaching of Taxation	Ms Kerry de Hart (Taxation)
11:40	Using social media	Mr Denzil Chetty (Religious Studies)
12:00	Using blogging on myUnisa	Ms Dalize van Heerden (Computing)
12:20	Towards the future: strategic choices to support innovation in teaching and learning	Panel discussion
13:00	Response 1	Prof Peter Havenga (Executive Director: Academic Planner)
13:10	Response 2	Prof Pam Ryan (Executive Director, Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor)
13:20	Closure	Dr Paul Prinsloo, ODL Coordinator
13:30	<i>Lunch</i>	

Don't miss this opportunity to celebrate and engage with some of the trend-setters in teaching and learning at Unisa!

4 REPORT BACK AFTER THE STLSC MEETING OF 18 OCTOBER

At the STLSC meeting of 18 October the report from ODL Task team 5 (Student Support) was tabled and the recommendations approved with a few minor changes. A number of participants congratulated the team for a very comprehensive and in many ways ground-breaking report. Well-done to the team! The executive summary of the report states as follows:

Student support at Unisa is provided by a range of stakeholders and the various stakeholders render academic, affective and administrative support to students. While a range of student support services are available to all students, specific support (eg face-to-face tutorials, video and satellite broadcasting, counseling services, etc) are often only realised depending on a range of factors such as the focus of the service rendered, the number of students in a specific geographic region, the necessary academic expertise, the time the service is offered, etc. At present most of the institutional student support interventions (eg counseling, social, financial support services, etc) are available free-of-charge to all students depending on the availability of the service, etc. Currently face-to-face tutorials are rendered at a small extra cost to students. Student support at Unisa will comprise of three distinct 'types' of student support namely cognitive (academic), affective (emotional or pastoral and social) and administrative support. Different stakeholders at Unisa share these responsibilities, albeit often in uncoordinated and overlapping ways.

This proposal has as aim to initiate four main thrusts namely to

- firstly enhance and improve the quality and effectiveness of all current student support initiatives including student support rendered by a range of stakeholders such as academics, TSDL, DCCAD, etc;
- secondly, to pilot technology enhanced student support to specific identified groups of students at specific points in their learning journeys by all stakeholders, but specifically aimed at introducing E-Tutors and/or E-Mentors;
- thirdly, to design and use interactive computer marked self-assessment tools and
- fourthly, to use a range of technologies more effectively to communicate to specific groups of students at specific junctures of their student walk.

These four thrusts is not the final word on student support at Unisa but are specifically aimed at reaching the up-to-now unreached students from 2011-2013. This will lay the foundation for an iterative process of continuous innovation and quality assurance in student support.

As stated in the report, I would like to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of a number of Unisa employees in the report, namely

- Since 1995 student support at Unisa has grown through the vision, commitment and leadership of individuals, often without broad-based institutional support and understanding. This proposal builds on the work and initiatives of these various individuals, teams and initiatives.
Since 2007 Unisa grew in understanding the complexities of ODL as we grow towards becoming a fully-fledged ODL institution in the specific context of South African and the continent of Africa. This document salutes the staff that dedicated their energies and passion into tirelessly, and often with insufficient institutional support, tried to realise ODL.
- In 2010 Dr Japie Heydenrych (then from DSPQA) provided leadership in ODL Task Team 4: Student Support. Under his leadership a conceptual framework for student support at Unisa was tabled at the Senate meeting of 2 June and accepted.
- In the second semester, ODL Task teams 4 (Student support) and 6 (Student retention and success) worked closer together under the leadership of Prof George Subotzky (Executive Director: Information and Strategic Analysis) and the synergy between these two teams resulted in many of the insights in this document.
- I would like to specifically thank Ms Mahlapane Molatlhegi and Ms Nelisa Tshaka (both from TSDL), Ms Francette Myburgh (ICT), Mr Louis Eloff (HR) and members of ODL Task team 6: Student success and retention, who critically engaged with various versions of this document.
- The support and guidance the ODL Project received from Prof Makhanya (Prof Vice-Chancellor and Vice Chancellor Designate), Prof Maré (Vice-Principal: Academic and Research), Prof Mosoma (Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-Principal: Student Affairs and Learner Support), Prof Havenga (Academic Planner), Prof Ryan (Executive Director: Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor) and Dr Mokhaba (Executive Director: Learner Support) provided the different ODL teams with a 'safe' space to explore the complexities of ODL.
- A previous draft was circulated to members of ODL Task teams 4 (Student support) and 6 (Student retention and success) and discussed at a meeting on 1 September. Input was received after the meeting of a range of individuals and stakeholders.

The full report is available on the ODL repository (see the link below).

5 WHY THIS OBSESSION WITH TECHNOLOGY?

As Unisa commits itself to a more optimum use of technologies and specifically Web2.0 technologies, it is maybe worthwhile to consider the rationale for this drive. As stated earlier in this communiqué, no technology can rescue bad teaching... There is also good teaching without using any technologies.

There is also evidence that some strategies to mainstream the use of technologies in higher education has failed. But there is *enough* evidence, internationally and in South Africa, that indicates that the effective use of appropriate technologies *do* enhance student success, depth of learning and lecturer and student satisfaction. A number of things to consider:

- Graduateness in the 21st century inevitably means being competent in a world immersed in the use of Web2.0 technologies and networks. Unisa will not fulfil our mandate if we fail to prepare our graduates for this world.
- Most (all?) of our students have mobiles and/or MP3 players. Audio podcasts (MP3s) can be downloaded onto a range of affordable devices. Once you have downloaded the podcast, you can listen to it whether you have network coverage or not; and wherever you find yourself.
- MCQs can be submitted using mobile technologies.
- Mxit can be used from most mobiles and is very affordable.
- If students can be provided with affordable data packages, they may use their mobiles even more effectively to access a range of resources.
- Good teaching can become better teaching using appropriate technologies effectively.
- Learning can be so much more effective (and deeper) if students become involved in their learning in collaborative environments.
- Web2.0 technologies allow lecturers to develop reusable objects that can be designed and developed once and used often.

6 THIRTY-FIVE COMMUNIQUÉS LATER

When the first ODL Communiqué was created and sent out at the end of January 2010, I could not have foreseen how these communiqués would have evolved. Where the first issues of communiqués were strictly reporting on the ODL task teams and ODL processes, the content of the communiqués gradually became more reflective and, inevitably personal. I realise that blogging per se has a strong personal character, but the fact that this blog also serve an “official” purpose regarding the implementation of ODL – does offer unique opportunities but also challenges. Writing these communiqués is always a balance between sharing information, prompting reflection and questioning some of the institution’s beliefs and assumptions regarding teaching and learning in an ODL environment.

These communiqués also serve as an opportunity for me to reflect on *my own* thought-processes and frameworks. Hopefully the fact that I shared and share my reflections in the public domain of Unisa will prompt critical response when I make unwarranted claims or statements.

Thirty-five communiqués later I don't regret starting writing and circulating these communiqués. I am indebted to all of you who read these communiqués, whether you comment on them or not. Thank you for being part of my own journey as ODL coordinator, and part of the bigger journey of defining and implementing ODL at Unisa.

7 ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072> (accessed 19 October 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads. You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled "Important links" under which you must then click on "Blogs". On the blog page, you will notice two links namely "E-connect" and "Open Distance Learning". If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa

19 October 2010

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office)

+27 (0) 823954113 (mobile)

prinsp@unisa.ac.za

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.